

Chinese Herbal Medicine

by Daniel Reid

What follows is an article regarding Chinese Herbal Medicine. In the modern world, there are lots of options for us when we become ill. Chinese Herbal Medicine is something that has been around for centuries but is still not something tried by everyone. When you are feeling unwell, you want to try anything to make you feel better and Chinese Herbal Medicine becomes a place for you to turn, it should in fact be your first port of call.

Those who are interested in learning more about Chinese Herbal Medicine or are considering trying it, should be fully aware of it's history as a form of medicine. The more enlightened one is on a topic, the more comfortable they will feel trying it. If you are interested in the world of medicine, perhaps you are a doctor or have been looking at online nursing degrees, then you will find this fascinating. Even those interested in history should enjoy this. We hope you enjoy what you read here and find it informative.

Many centuries ago in southern China, a farmer in Yunnan found a snake crawling about near his hut. He beat it with a hoe and left it for dead. A few days later he found the same snake in his garden, and again he tried to beat it to death. When the snake reappeared a third time, apparently no worse for the wear, the flustered farmer bashed it once more, but this time he hid in the bushes and watched the wounded, bleeding reptile limp into a clump of strange weeds, from which it ate. By the next morning the snake's wounds were healed and its vitality restored.

And so the marvelous medicinal herb *shan-chi* (*Gynura pinnatifida*) was discovered. The white powder extracted from this weed staunches bleeding immediately, causes the edges of wounds to adhere (hence the name, which means "mountain varnish"), and heals tissue quickly with minimal scarring. So reputed was this medicinal herb among China's martial artists that they gave it another name – *jin-bu-huan*, or "Gold-no-trade." Grown only in Yunnan, China, the government there supplied the overwhelming bulk of this herb to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, where it became part of every soldier's field kit, allowing men on the battlefield to treat their own gunshot wounds and continue fighting.

The Legend of the Snake aptly illustrates the folk origins of Chinese herbal medicine . We are all familiar with another obvious example of this: anyone who has owned a dog has surely seen it eat wild weeds to induce vomiting . While Westerners tend to regard such behavior as a nuisance, the curious Chinese would instead experiment with those weeds as possible emetic herbs for man. After 5000 years of such continuous empirical observation and trial-and-error experimentation with nature's flora and fauna, the Chinese have compiled the world's most complete and effective pharmacopeia of medicinal herbs.

The Chinese attribute the discovery of herbal medicine to the legendary emperor Shen Nung, who taught the Chinese agriculture around 3500 B.C. "Shen Nung tasted the myriad herbs, and so the art of medicine was born," wrote the great Han Dynasty historian Ssu-ma Chien. The characters Yao ("medicine") and Yi ("doctor") first appeared on oracle bones about 3000 years ago, indicating that

herbal medicine had already become a serious profession in China back when Westerners still lived like characters in the cartoon-strip "B.C."

The art of herbal medicine was pioneered by the reclusive Taoist adepts who lived as hermits in China's remote mountains since the dawn of Chinese history. In their search for life-prolonging elixirs, these Taoist "Immortals" gathered and tested all sorts of rare mountain plants. Those which proved useful in curing disease and sustaining health they took down to the markets of ancient China to trade for food, wine, cloth and other basic necessities. The herbs were then further tested by tribal shamans, and later by herbal physicians, and their effects were recorded for posterity. Today, in the garish herbal emporiums of Taipei, Hong Kong and Singapore, Chinese herbalists still do brisk business dispensing the same ancient remedies to contemporary customers.

The bible of Chinese herbal medicine is called "*Ben Tsao Gang Mu*," a voluminous tome compiled over a 27 year period by the Ming Dynasty physician Lee Shi-chen during the late 16th century. This book became popular in 19th century Western medical circles under the title "Treasures of Chinese Medicine," and it influenced Charles Darwin in the development of his own classification of nature's species. The Chinese pharmacopeia classifies and analyzes close to 2,000 medicinal drugs, including items derived from plant, animal, and mineral sources, and today it remains the Chinese herbalist's most important reference tool.

Nurturing Life

The comprehensive Chinese system for health and longevity of which herbal medicine forms an integral part is called *yang-sheng*, literally "nurturing life." This ancient regimen for longevity includes proper diet, correct breathing, regular exercise, regulated sex, and herbal remedies. Unlike Western medicine, which has fragmented itself into highly specialized and mutually exclusive branches, Chinese medicine is a synthetic system which regards the human body as a whole integrated organism, including both the physical body and the invisible energy system which drives all its functions.

In ancient China, families usually retained the services of an herbal physician to be on call when needed to handle matters of family health, much as modern corporations retain attorneys to deal with legal matters. The doctor would visit the family household on a regular basis to check each individual's health, dispense herbal prescriptions, and offer general medical advice to each person as required for his or her individual condition. The doctor received a regular monthly fee for as long as he kept the entire family in good health. However, the moment someone in the family fell ill, all payments to the doctor stopped until he restored the patient to health – at his own expense! This custom served as a powerful deterrent to malpractice, for it was always in the doctor's best financial interest to keep his clients as healthy and happy as possible, not sick and dependent on drugs. This custom also illustrates the most fundamental difference between traditional Eastern and modern Western medical systems – the preventive method of traditional medicine versus the "quick-fix" drug-and-surgery approach of modern allopathic medicine.

The goal of Chinese *yang-sheng* therapy is to **prevent** disease from occurring by keeping all of the body's organs and their vital functions in a healthy state, and by keeping the body's vital energies strong and well balanced. In Western medicine, doctors wait for disease to strike, then attempt to effect quick cures of the symptoms with chemicals, scalpels, radiation, and modern technology. But these therapies often take such a toll on the body, and cause so many harmful side effects, that

patients are left weak and vulnerable to further attack by other conditions. By contrast, Chinese curative therapies, which are applied only when prevention fails, are gentle, natural, and free of undesirable side-effects. Chinese physicians always take the "whole picture" into account by diagnosing a patient's climate, diet, geographical surroundings, sexual habits, and other factors that Western specialists consider "unrelated." Dr. Chang Chen-kuo, director of a new hospital in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, which is dedicated to blending traditional Chinese therapy with modern Western medical technology, states the difference between East and West succinctly:

"When a pot of water is boiling hot and puffing steam, a Western doctor, to quiet it, might simply open the lid, pour in a bit of cold water, and seal it up again. The water stops bubbling and the boiling sound is gone. But after a while, the pot is rocking again, because the fire underneath is still there. A Chinese physician would work hard to remove the fire."

In a nutshell, Chinese medical theory boils down to one word – chi (pronounced "chee"). Chi means "air" and "breath," but it also denotes "vital energy" and "life-force." Chi is what you feel fluttering deep in your lower abdomen when overly excited or frightened, such as the "butterflies" of stage-fright. The lower gut (called the "Sea of Chi" in Chinese) forms the seat of the body's vital energies. The essential art of the Chinese physician is to manipulate and balance the various types of vital energy with herbal remedies, acupuncture, massage, and other traditional techniques distilled from 3000 years of clinical experience. The relevant medical terminology is self-explanatory: "clear away energy obstructions, tonify energy deficiencies, warm up cold-energy excess, cool down hot-energy excess, suppress rebellious energy," and so forth. Ginger, for example, helps "warm up" the external organs in the cold of winter, thereby preventing chills, while fresh mint helps keep the system cool in midsummer, reducing the chances of heat-stroke and fatigue, while also assisting digestion. Fresh oranges are "cooling," but lychees cause an accumulation of "fire excess." The permutations and combinations are endless.

The Tools of the Trade

Step into any traditional Chinese herbal pharmacy in Taipei, Hong Kong, or Singapore, and your senses are overwhelmed by exotic sights and smells. You'll see stacks of dried lizards and toads, bundles of rigid centipedes and scorpion tails, vats of venomous snakes steeped in wine, anteater scales and hornet nests, and some things that defy description. Invoking the ancient Chinese medical principle "fight poison with poison," herbalists routinely prescribe such toxic teas as *Datura stramonium*, arsenic, cinnabar, mercury, lead, and the nasty creatures listed above to combat some of mankind's most virulent ailments. Toxins are especially effective in curing nervous and respiratory disorders.

Some of the nearly 2000 items listed in Lee Shih-chen's pharmacopeia are downright weird. The urine of boys under twelve years old, for example, is prescribed for pulmonary tuberculosis, chronic coughs, and neurasthenia. Dried human placenta is recommended as a tonic for impotence and infertility, while powdered human hair is given for rectifying menstrual disorders. Any further examples from this section of the *Ben Tsao Gang Mu* would cast doubt on this author's veracity, so curious readers are advised to delve further on their own. Lee's *Ben-Tsaopharmacopeia* has been translated into English as "Chinese Materia Medica" by Bernard E. Read and G. A. Stuart (Southern Materials Center, Taipei, 1976).

Herbal prescriptions take several forms, and many of the most commonly used ingredients are familiar items on the spice shelves of western kitchens. Cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, licorice, orange peel, and other aromatic herbs appear in some amounts in almost all prescriptions. The most popular method of ingestion is to boil the dried herbs in water until the decoction is reduced by half, then strain it and take the concentrate in two doses. Another method is to grind the ingredients to a very fine powder, then form little pellets with a binder of honey. These are taken by the dozen several times a day for a steady "time-release" effect. Herbs which tonify the vital organs and stimulate the libido are steeped for up to a year in strong Chinese spirits to make "Spring Wine," and a shot of this is taken once or twice daily. Serums are made from herbs by mixing them with flour and water and letting them ferment. Refined concentrates which may be ingested orally or injected are extracted from dried and fresh herbs using the latest modern technology. The latter method is used to produce a wide range of patent medicines which may be conveniently carried in places where there are no Chinese herbalists.

At the Chinese University in Hong Kong, herbal physicians are employing Western technology to isolate, extract, and refine a safe and highly effective birth-control element from a common weed that grows wild throughout the world. Free of side-effects and practically "fail-safe" the herb can be grown in window-boxes and gardens by poor peasants who have no access to the refined form. All they have to do is steep it in hot water and take it as tea. Until this product is perfected and fully patented, the identity of this population control herb remain a closely guarded secret, for the Chinese do not wish to see it co-opted and chemically corrupted by Western pharmaceutical conglomerates.

Try It, You'll Like It

Intrepid travelers in Taipei, Hong Kong, and Singapore will have no trouble finding qualified Chinese herbalists to treat their ailments. Whether it be a sore back, pulled muscles, constipation, fatigue, sluggish circulation or any other chronic condition, next time you should try the Chinese way. Simply follow your nose to the nearest pharmacy, leave your cultural biases at the door, and explain your problems to the herbalist. In most cases, you'll find that the man smiling at you from across the wooden counter has healthy, happy appearance, which should encourage you to try his formulas. His bright eyes and clear complexion, sturdy body and alert mind, and his obvious vitality attest to the efficacy of his trade.

In Taipei, you can get expert herbal advice and top-notch therapy by visiting any of the scores of herbal pharmacies which line the streets of downtown Taipei. In Singapore, traditional Chinese herbalists can still be found dispensing their remedies in the ever dwindling enclave of Chinatown. Hong Kong, with direct access to mainland China's vast herbal cornucopia, has the most flourishing herbal medicine trade in the Far East. Unless you speak or write Chinese, you should always visit Chinese herbal emporiums with someone who knows the language. In the West, Chinese herbalists can often be found practicing their ancient arts in the Chinatowns of major capitals.

A few basic herbal prescriptions are provided below. They are uniformly safe and quite effective when properly applied to the relevant ailments. They do not work instantly, but when taken regularly over a period of time, they usually produce positive results. However, all patients, East and West, would be well advised to bear in mind the following advice recorded by the Tang Dynasty physician Sun Ssu-mo in his book "Precious Recipes". Dr Sun, who lived to be 101, correctly diagnosed the vitamin-deficiency disease beri-beri a thousand years before European doctors figured it out in 1642.

Sun prescribed wheat-germ, liver, seaweed, almonds, wild peppers, and other vitamin-rich foods for this and many other ailments. His words are the most fitting conclusion to any discussion of Chinese herbal medicine:

"A truly good physician first finds out the cause of the illness, and having found that, he first tries to cure it with food. Only when food fails does he prescribe medication."